The Backrooms

The Backrooms are a fictional location originating from a 2019 4chan thread. One of the best known examples of the liminal space aesthetic, the Backrooms are usually portrayed as an impossibly large extradimensional expanse of empty rooms, accessed by exiting ("no-clipping out of") reality.

The original Backrooms image posted on 4chan

Internet users have expanded on the concept of the Backrooms, introducing concepts such as "levels" and hostile creatures that inhabit the space. In early 2022, American YouTuber Kane Parsons started a series of *Backrooms* short films on YouTube, which went viral. The videos have been credited with igniting a surge in Backrooms content and taking the concept into the mainstream. Parsons is slated to direct a film adaptation of his series produced by A24.

History

Original creepypasta

Between 2011 and 2018, a photograph of a large, carpeted room with fluorescent lights and dividing walls circulated on various message boards, and on May 12, 2019, an anonymous user started a thread on /x/, 4chan's paranormal-themed board, asking users to "post disquieting images that just feel 'off,'" accompanying the thread with the photograph.[1][2][3]

Another user replied to this post, giving the image its name and supplying the first description of the Backrooms:

> If you're not careful and you noclip[a] out of reality in the wrong areas, you'll end up in the Backrooms, where it's nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz, and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in
> God save you if you hear something wandering around nearby, because it sure as hell has heard you
>
> —Anonymous, 4chan (May 13, 2019)[1]

Growth and fandom

Some stories about the Backrooms include malevolent creatures.

Days after the original creepypasta,[5] users began to share stories about the Backrooms on subreddits such as r/creepypasta and later r/backrooms.[2] A fandom began to develop around the Backrooms and creators expanded upon the original iteration of the creepypasta by creating additional floors or "levels" and entities which populate them.[3][4] *Happy Mag* noted in particular two other levels: Level 1, a level with industrial architecture, and Level 2, a darkly lit level with long service tunnels, with the original version named Level 0.[4]

As new levels were devised in r/backrooms, a faction of fans who preferred the original Backrooms split off from the fandom. A Reddit user named Litbeep created another subreddit called r/TrueBackrooms focusing only on the original version. *ABC News* said that unlike fandoms surrounding existing properties, the lack of a canonical Backrooms made "drawing a line between authentic storytelling and jokes" difficult.[2][3] By March 2022, r/backrooms had over 157,000 members.[2]

The fandom steadily expanded onto other platforms with the upload of videos on Twitter and TikTok.[5] Wikis hosted on Fandom and Wikidot dedicated to the Backrooms lore were established.[6]

Dan Erickson, creator of the television series *Severance* (2022), named the Backrooms as one of his many influences while working on the series.[7]

Image origin

Until 2024, the source of the original Backrooms image was not widely known.[3][8][9] In May 2024, a Twitter user announced in a now-viral post that their friend had discovered the image's origin.[8][9] This was the result of a combined effort in a Backrooms-dedicated Discord community,[10] which traced the image to an archived webpage from March 2003 using the Wayback Machine.[11]

The image was found to be taken during the renovation of "a former furniture store with plenty of partitions and fake inner walls" in Wisconsin.[12] For much of the 20th century, Rohner's Home Furnishings occupied 807 and 811 Oregon Street, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.[13] In 1994, 807 Oregon Street was acquired by a new tenant, an American hobby shop called HobbyTown.[9][10]

Sometime in 2002, the second story underwent renovations. On June 12, 2002, the progress was photographed with a Sony Cyber-shot camera, and on March 2, 2003, the various interior views were documented on the Oshkosh branch's renovation weblog.[9] One photograph depicts a carpeted, open room with yellow wallpaper and fluorescent lighting on a Dutch angle. Uploaded with the file name "Dsc00161.jpg", it is the image that would go on to inspire the concept of the Backrooms.[8][9][12] The image was captioned as an original view of "the East (Oval) room", and noted that no windows were visible. The blog entry described extensive water damage that required the area to be cleared.[12][10] HobbyTown has since converted the facility into a radio-controlled car racing track called Revolution Racing, and the room's original layout is now gone.[8][12][10]

Reception

The Backrooms have been associated with an internet aesthetic known as liminal spaces, which include "images of eerie and uninhabited spaces", such as the above empty hallway.[14]

Some sources believe the Backrooms to have been the origin of the internet aesthetic of liminal spaces,[5] which depict usually busy locations as unnaturally empty. The #liminalspaces hashtag has amassed nearly 100 million views on TikTok.[14][15] *Paste*'s Phoenix Simms wrote that the Backrooms and games such as the more absurdist *The Stanley Parable* is "tied to a long tradition of the liminal in horror" and the color yellow as a symbol of caution, deterioration, and existential distress. The Backrooms' is "a fungal, sickly yellow", where both the person and the mind can lose themselves.[16]

PC Gamer compared the Backrooms' various levels to H. P. Lovecraft's R'lyeh and The City in the manga *Blame!*, describing it as "an uncanny valley of place".[17] *ABC News* and *Le Monde* grouped the Backrooms into an "emerging genre of collaborative online horror" which also includes the SCP Foundation.[3][6] *Kotaku* said that this collaborative aspect, as well as the lack of overt horror or threat, made the Backrooms stand out from other creepypastas.[5] Both *Kotaku* and Tama Leaver, professor of internet studies at Curtin University, felt that the Backrooms was scary "because [it invites] you to interpret what's not shown". While Leaver believed that the "eerie feeling of familiarity" helped draw fans together, *Kotaku* said that the horror was in part derived from the subtle "wrongness" present in liminal spaces.[2][5]

A TikTok trend of videos that zoom in on Google Earth to reveal an entrance to the Backrooms have grown popular.[17][18]

Adaptations

YouTube

In January 2022, a short horror film titled "The Backrooms (Found Footage)" was uploaded to YouTube. Created by then-16-year-old Kane Parsons of Northern California, known online as Kane Pixels, it is presented as a VHS tape recorded by a filmmaker who accidentally enters the Backrooms in the 1990s and is pursued by a monster.[19][20] Parsons used the software Blender and Adobe After Effects to create the environment of the Backrooms, and it took him a month to complete it. He described the Backrooms as a manifestation of a poorly remembered recollection of the late 90s and early 2000s.[2][3] The video has over 63 million views as of November 2024.[21][22]

The short was praised by the fandom[21] and received positive reviews from critics. WPST called it "the scariest video on the Internet".[23] *Otaku USA* categorized it as analog horror,[24] while *Dread Central* and *Nerdist* compared it favorably to the 2019 video game *Control*.[25][26] *Kotaku* praised the series for exercising restraint in its horror and mystery.[5] *Boing Boing*'s Rob Beschizza predicted

that the Backrooms, like the creepypasta Slender Man and its panned 2018 film adaptation, would eventually be adapted into a "slick but dismal 2-hour Hollywood movie."[27]

Expanding his videos into a series of sixteen shorts,[28] Parsons introduced plot aspects such as Async, an organization which opened a portal into the Backrooms in the 1980s and conducted research within it.[3][5] The series has collectively garnered over 100 million views.[29] It is also credited with lifting the Backrooms from obscurity into the mainstream internet and causing a surge in Backrooms content,[5][17] particularly on YouTube.[30] For his shorts, Parsons received a Creator Honors at the 2022 Streamy Awards from The Game Theorists.[31]

Film adaptation

On February 6, 2023, A24 announced that they are working on a film adaptation of the Backrooms based on Parsons' videos, with Parsons directing. Roberto Patino is set to write the screenplay, while James Wan, Michael Clear from Atomic Monster, Shawn Levy, Dan Cohen, and Dan Levine of 21 Laps are set to produce.[19][28]

American Horror Stories

An episode inspired by the Backrooms stories was included in the third season *American Horror Stories*, a direct spin-off to *American Horror Story*.[32][33][34] The episode stars Michael Imperioli as a grief-stricken screenwriter that falls in and out of the "Backrooms", mundane locations where he is confronted by a manifestation of his missing son.[35] The episode was one in a group of five to be released as a "Huluween event".[36]

Video games

The Backrooms have been adapted into numerous video games, including on the platforms Steam and Roblox.[17][21][37] An indie game was released by Pie on a Plate Productions two months after the original creepypasta,[38] and was positively reviewed for its atmosphere but received criticism for its short length.[39][40][41] Many others, such as *Enter the Backrooms*, *Noclipped* and *The Backrooms Project*, were released in the following years.[37] Co-op multiplayer *Escape the Backrooms* by Fancy Games was praised by *Bloody Disgusting* for its depiction of the extended lore,[28][42] while *The Backrooms 1998* (both 2022), a psychological survival horror game independently released by

one-person developer Steelkrill Studio, was noted by reviewers for its found footage visuals and limited save system.[43][44]

See also

- Labyrinth
- List of creepypastas

Notes

a. *No clipping* is a video game term for commands that allow the player to go through solid walls and objects.[4]

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External links

- The Backrooms (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-backrooms) entry at Know Your Meme
- Kane Pixels's channel (https://www.youtube.com/@kanepixels) on YouTube